

Feeding Hartford's Children When School's Out- The Summer Food Service Program

Keeping It Local

Overview

Since 1993, the City of Hartford's Summer Food Service Program has experienced fluctuations in participation by children and problems with the quality of meals provided by contract food vendors. The City of Hartford's Advisory Commission on Food Policy makes the following recommendations to ensure that more of Hartford's children receive wholesome, nutritious meals during the summer:

- Ensure that the bidding process recognizes the value of local food vendor contracts and enhances the opportunity for local food vendors to participate in the bidding process;
- Encourage the development of local food vendors and/or food vendor consortium to apply for the contract;
- Create clearer quality standards for the food vendor;
- Develop an on-going monitoring process of the food vendor contract (that includes surveying the children);
- Create and implement consequences for inability to meet quality standards;
- Improve publicity and outreach for the school's and the city's Summer Meal Program sites.

I. Problem Statement:

The City of Hartford's Summer Food Service Program relies on contracts with vendors to provide nutritious meals to students participating in the city's summer recreation programs. Unfortunately, over the years, vendors have not always provided fresh, wholesome foods. The quality of the meals served has been a source of concern to the city and the City of Hartford's Advisory Commission on Food Policy. Also, the Summer Food Service Program has experienced a low participation rate of those eligible (estimated at 24% in 2001), when compared to the participation rate in the meals program held during the school year (estimated at 81% in 2001).

II. Background:

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was established to provide nutritious meals to children attending school and to utilize the nation's agricultural surplus. Following the establishment of the NSLP, it was recognized that during the summer months, many children who did not attend summer school were going without nutritious lunches.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was established in 1968 to provide nutritious meals to children who are not enrolled in summer school, but are still in need. The SFSP provides federal funds to local sponsors (in Hartford, these sponsors are the City of Hartford and Hartford Public Schools) who carry out the daily operations of the program and supervise participating sites. In the past five years, through the SFSP, the City of Hartford and Hartford Public Schools have served over one million nutritious meals to low-income Hartford children who otherwise may have gone without. During the 2001 season, an average of 1,819 children (City) and 4,506

children (Hartford Public Schools) were served each day at 55 sites throughout the city and in neighboring areas. A total of 78,777 meals were served in the City program and 173,162 meals were served in the Public School program. The cost of the Summer Food Service Program for 2001 was \$170,994 for the City program and \$359,531 for the Public School program.

Year	School Sites			City Sites			Totals		
	Sites *	Breakfast	Lunch	Sites *	Breakfast	Lunch	Sites *	Breakfast	Lunch
2000	31	64,668	98,704	43	24,109	78,703	74	88,777	177,407
2001	28	63,394	109,768	27	19,034	59,743	55	82,428	169,511
% Change	-10%	-2%	+11%	-37%	-21%	-24%	-26%	-7%	-4%

* Note: In an effort to improve efficiency of the Summer Food Service Program, Hartford Public Schools, the City of Hartford, and the Advisory Commission on Food Policy agreed to consolidate sites in 2001.

It should be noted that the Hartford Public Schools Summer Food Service Program is open to all students regardless of enrollment in the Summer School Program. The Hartford Public School Summer Food Service Program bids for components of the meals and assembles them on site. The City does not have the sanitary facilities at each meal site to assemble the meal components. Thus, the City contract requires complete meals in individually contained package units.

The SFSP Guidelines state that the following meal components are required for each meal served:

- one serving of milk;
- two or more servings of vegetables and/or fruits;
- one serving of grain or bread; and
- one serving of meat or meat alternate.

In addition to serving nutritious meals, SFSP sites often offer educational and recreational activities for children.

III. Role of the Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy:

Since 1993, the Commission has been concerned with ensuring that all eligible Hartford children participate in the program. To that end, the Commission participated in several program promotion and marketing efforts. In 1996, the Commission developed a phone line that provided the public with direct and easy access to information about the closest available SFSP site.

In addition, the Commission had received complaints about the quality of food served at the city's SFSP sites. In 1992, Marymount, a company that is located in Bronx, New York, provided the service. The following year (1993) the bid was again awarded to Marymount and the Commission conducted a survey to investigate the complaints that were received the previous year. The survey results revealed a significant amount of food waste and food of poor quality. The Commission recommended that a local vendor should bid on the contract. A local vendor should improve the quality of food served because less time would elapse between meal preparation and delivery to the meal sites. For the next three years (1995-1997) and in 1999 a local vendor, Community Renewal Team (CRT) was awarded the bid.

In an effort to improve the program, the Commission encouraged CRT to bid as the local vendor who could consistently provide the SFSP service. However, CRT chose not to bid on the 2000 SFSP contract due to the impact of the recently adopted Living Wage Ordinance for all City of Hartford contracts. In order to increase the odds of local vendors making bids, the Commission enlisted the assistance of then Deputy Mayor Frances Sanchez and Councilor Louis Watkins. Thanks to their efforts to clarify the Living Wage Ordinance, CRT was encouraged to bid again. However, bids are awarded to the vendor who meets the requirements at the lowest cost. In 2000 and 2001, the bid was again awarded to an outside vendor. The Commission surveyed the quality of food provided in 2001 and a general dissatisfaction was revealed. (See Survey Results and Letter) In 2001 CRT was underbid both by Whitson's of New Haven, CT (school sites) and Lindley Food Service of Purchase, NY (city sites).

In 1995, the Commission also proposed contract requirements to ensure that all vendors servicing the SFSP meet a certain standard of quality. The Commission's recommendations, which reflect the necessity of providing fresh food to the sites, were incorporated into the City of Hartford Special Instructions to Bidders. Among these recommendations was the requirement that all meals be prepared no more than twenty-four hours prior to scheduled consumption.

IV. Recommendations

The City of Hartford's Advisory Commission on Food Policy makes the following recommendations to ensure that more of Hartford's children receive wholesome, nutritious meals during the summer:

- Ensure that the bidding process recognizes the value of local food vendor contracts and enhances the opportunity for local food vendors to participate in the bidding process;
- Encourage the development of local food vendors and/or food vendor consortium to apply for the contract;
- Create clearer quality standards for the food vendor;
- Develop an on-going monitoring process of the food vendor contract (that includes surveying the children);
- Create and implement consequences for inability to meet quality standards;
- Improve publicity and outreach for both the school's and city's Summer Meal Program sites.

Rationale for Recommendations:

The City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy recommends that the City of Hartford and other SFSP sponsors take all steps possible to award the 2002 contract to a local food vendor and/or a consortium of local food vendors. The Commission is concerned about the quality of food served when a vendor from out of the area provides the service. Providing food of such poor quality that much of it needs to be discarded by the staff or is not eaten by the children is contrary to the objective of and discourages participation in the Summer Food Service Program. The Commission feels the quality of food served in a program that is intended to provide a nutritional oasis to those in need is of much higher priority than a low bid.

The City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy has noticed a general trend in the quality of food served at these program sites. In the years when the contract was awarded to a

local vendor, the service was improved relative to years when the contract was awarded to an out of state vendor. The local vendor was also able to address complaints and concerns with greater speed and enthusiasm. The Commission has in the past focused its efforts on outreach and education in order to improve the participation in, and therefore the overall success of, the program. However, encouraging a local vendor to provide the service will improve the quality of the program and increase the impact of outreach efforts by providing an attractive service that is easier to tailor to the needs of its clients.

The Commission is interested in exploring alternative vendors to bid on the service for the 2002 Summer Food Service Program and has advanced the idea of organizing a consortium of local food service providers to collaborate in providing the service.

This consortium is more likely to not only provide a higher quality of service for the Summer Meals Program, but could also fulfill the practices specified by the USDA (7 CFR part 3015) with respect to minority business enterprises. These guidelines state that it is a priority to solicit minority businesses whenever they are potential sources and to divide total requirements into smaller tasks or quantities so that participation by smaller, minority businesses is maximized.

In addition to improving service, awarding the contract to a vendor in the Hartford area will create jobs in the city for the summer months. Vendors may need to hire additional help so that they could provide service for the large city contract. An increase of jobs in Hartford has an obvious positive influence on the city. In addition to employing city workers, it is very likely that a local vendor would purchase from local food suppliers, thus 'recycling' city funds within the city. For the 2001 SFSP, Lindley Food Service of Purchase, New York and Whitson's of New Haven, Connecticut were awarded the contracts totaling \$530,525--providing 251,931 meals for the children of Hartford. This is \$531,000 dollars that could have gone to a city vendor and provided a summer income for city residents.

Unfortunately, the only vendor local to Hartford with the production and distribution capabilities to provide all the meals to the large number of different sites in this area has chosen not to bid or has lost the bid on the contract in the past few years. The other food service vendors in the Hartford area run operations that are too small to handle this large contract. Realizing the limitations of the individual vendors, the Commission offers the alternate solution of organizing a consortium of these Hartford area vendors to bid on the contract and provide the service for the 2002 Summer Food Service Program.

The Advisory Commission on Food Policy believes that such a consortium would be a viable and preferable alternative to allowing outside vendors to service the Summer Food Service Program and will result in the overall improvement of the program.

Chronology of Service:

Year	Vendor Providing Service	Location
1993	Marymount	Bronx, NY
1994	Marymount	Bronx, NY
1995	CRT	Hartford, CT
1996	CRT	Hartford, CT
1997	CRT	Hartford, CT
1998	Marymount	Bronx, NY
1999	CRT	Hartford, CT
2000	Marymount	Bronx, NY
2001	Lindley Food Service (City Sites) Whitson's (School Sites)	Purchase, NY New Haven, CT

Chronology of Involvement:

1993—The City of Hartford Commission on Food Policy received complaints about the quality of food served at the Summer Meal Program sites.

1994—A survey was conducted to measure the level of satisfaction and gather a consensus on the quality of food served at these sites. The results revealed a general level of dissatisfaction with the food served.

1995—The City of Hartford Commission on Food Policy developed contract requirements to improve the quality of food. (Ex: contract states it is required that food is “made fresh every day” but it does not require that the food is served on the day that it is made.) The survey from 1994 was conducted again, this year with the local vendor CRT providing service. The most common complaint heard on this round was soggy sandwiches.

1996—CRT said they would address the soggy sandwich problem.

1996—The Commission began expanding its outreach efforts in order to further increase participation. This resulted in a phone line that would detail the locations of sites by zip code. Successfully expanded the program so it is running for the whole summer (beginning and end of program meets up with the end and beginning of school). Freshness contract adherence was also monitored.

1998—The Commission formed a subcommittee (involving Connecticut Anti-Hunger Coalition, et al) to address the low participation rates and expand the outreach and awareness of the program. CRT lost the bid this year. It was again awarded to Marymount. There were the same recurring problems with the service. They were late delivering the food to the kick off event. The Commission asked for an explanation why Marymount was awarded the bid when they provide food at a level of quality that is lower than acceptable.

1999—CRT was again awarded the bid, everyone seemed pleased with service.

2000—CRT did not bid due to Living Wage Ordinance issue. Complaints about quality were made again.

2001—Lindley Food Service (Purchase, NY) was awarded the contract for recreation sites, Whitson's (New Haven, CT) was awarded the school sites, both out of town. HFPC performed survey to measure quality and satisfaction of food. Found general dissatisfaction and a lot of waste.